

YOUNG PEOPLE'S CONCERT

Notes by Jackson Harmeyer, Abendmusik Alexandria Series Director

During his tenure with the New York Philharmonic, the eminent conductor-composer-educator Leonard Bernstein hosted a series of fifty-three televised concerts he titled *Young People's Concerts*. This series which ran from 1958 to 1972 – and during its most popular three years on CBS primetime – witnessed Bernstein addressing diverse topics as difficult as understanding the music of noted twentieth-century composers and as controversial as playing jazz or folk music in the concert hall. The aim of these concerts was to instill in young audiences the love of music, and Bernstein achieved this aim so admirably that even older audiences became devoted to the enlightening series.

Our program this evening is titled “Young People’s Concert” after this series by Bernstein. While it shares his aims to introduce youths to music and encourage them to love music, the method is different. Whereas Bernstein had his orchestra of professionals play music specially programmed for young listeners, our “Young People’s Concert” has asked youths to be the performers themselves. Twenty-two young people have taken-up various string instruments and come together under the direction of John De Chiaro to become the Young Artists Chamber Orchestra of Alexandria. This group is an extension of the highly-acclaimed Alexandria Youth Orchestra which has performed at New York’s famed Carnegie Hall and elsewhere throughout the nation, participating in competitions but also playing the national anthem at sports games. The music they have learned is both difficult and diverse, as were the topics Bernstein addressed in his series.

This evening’s program begins with *Dance of the Harlequins* by New York-based composer Larry Clark. Clark’s music is some of the most performed by school orchestras and bands across America. Not only that, but it asks much musicianship from its performers, and has even won awards from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP). *Dance of the Harlequins* is a short, lively piece depicting the many moods of the trickster character Harlequin from Italian *Commedia dell’arte*. The composition is also a variation on the familiar *Pachelbel’s Canon*, consciously employing its harmonic progression as the foundation for a new piece.

The next piece on this evening’s program is called *Rhosymedre*. The celebrated British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958) based this composition on a hymn tune written by the Welsh priest John David Edwards. Originally, Vaughan Williams included

Rhosymedre as the second in a set of three organ pieces composed in 1920. Since that time, *Rhosymedre* has been arranged for many different ensembles including two pianos, full orchestra, or as it is heard here string orchestra. The reserved piece shimmers in rustic beauty.

Maharaja by Cincinnati-based composer Doug Spata follows. Best-known for his works for student musicians, Spata has also written symphonies, ballets, and even an opera. He is an active blogger, and at his blog he cites artists as wide-ranging as Stravinsky, Mozart, Vivaldi, John Adams, and the rock band Queen as among his favorites. His *Maharaja* invokes India as it appears in the Bollywood films which have become such a sensation in the United States in past years. Finger snapping and slurred *pizzicati* open the witty composition, giving it a somewhat jazzy feel before the sweeping bowed strings introduce a color more traditionally associated Indian music.

Award-winning composer Susan Day lives and works in Littleton, Colorado. She has taught strings for over 30 years, and is also a violinist with the Arapahoe Philharmonic. In 1994, she established her own publishing firm so her students could have music that would not only distinguish them from other student groups but also stimulate their imaginations. Her *Mystic Rhapsody* succeeds at both goals. As its intriguing harmonies and tuneful melodies capture the imaginations of its young performers, each section of instruments faces its own challenges realizing the stately piece in performance.

The following piece *Rondo Concertante* by Chicago-based composer David O’Fallon features three soloists on violin, viola, and cello. O’Fallon is a percussionist who often plays with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He participated in their recording of the soundtrack to Disney’s *Fantasia 2000*, and has also led his own Caribbean-styled band Jamaican Breeze. His *Rondo Concertante* teaches young musicians the difference between soloist and accompanist roles while also engaging both of these groups with its energetic pacing, frequent metric changes, pulsating rhythms, and other difficult techniques.

Danse macabre by the great French composer Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921) depicts a scene in which Death is personified as a fiddler surrounded by reanimated skeletons summoned to dance by his impassioned playing. This midnight frenzy even includes a parody of the *Dies irae* tune – a motive drawn from the Mass of

the Dead which has been used as a musical symbol for death ever since the Middle Ages. Saint-Saëns wrote this fearsome piece in 1874 and, although at its premiere it evoked noisy disapproval, *Danse macabre* has since become one of the composer's most popular works.

The final piece on this evening's program, *Lion City* is a work by composer Soon Hee Newbold. Born in Korea and adopted as an infant by the Newbold family of Maryland, Mrs. Newbold has enjoyed a dual career as a musician and film actress. The majority of her compositions have been for student orchestras. *Lion City* is one such work, and is meant as a depiction of Singapore – an independent city-state in Southeast Asia whose name literally translates to “Lion City.” *Lion City* was commissioned for the International Honor Orchestra Festival held in Singapore in 2009. There is much to invoke the traditional music of Singapore from the transient bowing and measured plucks which open the piece to the knocks and knee slaps which soon follow. After this scene-setting introduction, swift rhythms and exotic-sounding harmonies continue to shape the Asian image Newbold has created, and these elements eventually bring the piece to an inspired conclusion.

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